

The Redefinition of Australian Democracy

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The Federal government's budget announcement that private school funding will rise by 9.4%, while public schools will receive an increase of only 4.6% not unexpectedly has angered those connected with the public system. Such anger is of little concern to a government which appears to be intent only on redefining public education from the notion of it being a public good, to it being a commodity in an education market place.

But the anger about this latest trend in education funding should not be confined to those who teach in or who have children who attend public schools. Since redefining public education in this way has significant implications for our democratic system, it is something in which all Australians have a stake.

To appreciate this, the recent budget announcement needs to be understood within the context of a broader strategy to disrupt the agreement about public and private schools which has operated for the past quarter of a century. Since its election in 1996, the Coalition has sought to blur the distinction between public and private schools in order to create an education market in which consumers (parents and students) can exercise choice about which schools to attend. The point of this is to shift people across into private schools. It has achieved this in a number of ways.

The first strategy involved the abolition of Labor's New Schools Policy which had strictly regulated the establishment of new private schools, in favour of a policy of funding any non-government school which meets minimum State level requirements. That is, any new non-government school can now be established without analysis of the impact on neighbouring schools, and with no minimum or maximum enrolment requirements. The impact was immediate with a mushrooming of tiny 'independent' schools based on specific beliefs, such as fundamentalist Christian schools.

The next move was to create the enrolment benchmark adjustment scheme (EBA) which shifts \$1700 per student of Commonwealth funding from public to private schools, when the proportion of students at private schools increases. Given that DEETYA itself expects private schools growth rate to be about five times that of public schools over the next four years, the amount of funding lost to government schools will be significant, even when enrolments grow in the public system.

There is no doubt that both these policies are having an impact. ABS figures for the 1998 census show a 1.9% increase in private school student numbers for that year, while the number of students in public schools rose by only 0.4%.

And now, with its recent announcement, the government is putting in place the next piece of the policy jigsaw. This time it is abolishing another Labor policy, the Educational Resources Index (ERI), which funded private schools on the basis of resource capacity, and which moved them to a lower category if their resources increased in value through, say, private fund raising efforts.

In place of the ERI the government is proposing a system which allocates funds according to the socio-economic rating of the school. Under this new system schools will have the freedom to raise additional money from their own sources without affecting their funding levels. Such a system can only lead to better resourced private schools where in general terms parents have a greater capacity

to raise additional funds, and/or a lowering of private school fees, both of which will further fuel the shift from public to private schools.

It is not just a coincidence that such policies are being put in place at a time when public schools across Australia have been coping with significant reductions in State government expenditure on education. Already the proportion of students in non-government schools in Australia is at an historic high of 30%, and some estimates are that the combined effects of these policies will lift that figure to 35% in the not too distant future.

This shift of students from the public to the private system has a number of effects, the most significant of which is the way it threatens to alter our accepted understandings about the nature of public education. Since it is this change which endangers our democratic system, it is one which most demands community attention and debate. To understand the nature of the change we need to grasp how public and private education have been historically constructed.

The vigorous state-aid debates of the 1960s and 1970s culminated in a relatively bi-partisan approach to state-aid which institutionalised Federal (and State) funding of private schools on a 'needs' basis. That is, since the mid-1970s we have lived with a peculiarly Australian educational settlement where publicly-funded private schools co-exist with public schools. An important aspect of this settlement has been that private schools are defined in relation to the public system. That is, they are understood as places for people who wish to opt out of public provision in order to meet specific consumer needs, such as religious or cultural needs. Given the fee structures of some but not all private schools, wealth has also been a factor in determining which students go to which schools.

Defining the public/private school relationship in this way highlights a key difference. Broadly speaking, individual private schools represent a certain section of the population with similar characteristics, such as class, religion or culture or a combination of these. By contrast public schools comprise a diverse cross-section of the population of their local communities. It is this key difference which is about to change. As the government facilitates the shift to private schooling and creates a single education market, so the diversity of public schools will diminish.

This will happen as private schools take in students from the public system who opt to share the characteristics of the schools they join, and as public schools begin to use the mechanism of the market to shore up their chances of survival by offering niche curricula designed to attract particular sorts of students. That is, rather than a schooling system which fosters diversity within schools, we will move to a system where the key characteristic is homogeneity, with particular schools catering for specific groups of students organised on the basis of wealth, culture, ethnicity or religion.

It is this possibility which offers the gravest threat to our democratic system. Diversity within a public education system is crucial for an important democratic reason. A democracy requires a public - and publics don't just happen, they are made. The institution of public schooling, more than any other in our society, is central to the making of democratic 'publics'. Public schools don't just exist to serve the public by educating individuals. They actually turn a group of individuals with a host of differences into a civic entity we call a 'public'. This is because they represent a place where common ground is made and where a sense of the common good is fashioned.

The common spaces we call public schools should be places characterised by plurality and diversity because it is here that we can teach that a respect for difference is precisely what binds our society together. Such lessons are not possible when our schooling system is organised to separate out rather than to mix young people from a variety of backgrounds.

It is within these public spaces that students can serve an apprenticeship in democracy. The knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to function as effective and participating citizens are not things people are born with, they need to be taught systematically. Not the least of these is the capacity to recognise the reality and the legitimacy of different perspectives and diverse points of view. That is, the capacity to live beyond the comfort zone of a narrow group is central to the exercise of democratic life. But it is surely more difficult for this capacity to be developed and practised in schools which are built around the marginalisation or exclusion of particular life styles, cultures and points of view. It is ironic that at a time when the government is urging that schools embrace a civics education program called 'Discovering Democracy', it is pursuing also a policy direction which erodes the essential conditions for participation in civic life.

Defining private schools in relation to public education constructs the latter as a public good alongside which private schools can operate because we believe in the democratic right of people to opt out of the public provision if that is their wish. It is a different thing altogether to make private education the defining norm of our education system. Through the slick rhetoric of choice, the Coalition is seeking to seduce us into accepting that since education is a commodity it makes sense to encourage consumers to shop around for the right brand of product. In this view, the civic and democratic purposes of education are subservient to the benefits it confers upon individuals.

No doubt the response to this argument will be that an increase in funds to private schools will help to bring down fees and thus open private schools to a broader range of the population than ever before. Such an argument ignores at least two important facts. First, a reduction in fees for high to medium charging private schools is hardly likely to manufacture a rush of custom from the majority of the population whose capacity to pay even a tenth of existing fees is severely limited. The rhetoric of choice masks the reality that it is only the minority with the requisite financial and cultural resources who are in a position to exercise that freedom.

Second, in the education market being established by the government, it is hardly likely that private schools will open their gates to anyone who applies. After all, accompanying the budget announcement last week was a statement by Dr Kemp to the effect that Commonwealth funding to private schools will be dependent on schools meeting national targets in areas such as literacy, numeracy and science. In a results based environment like this, one can only assume that schools in a position to choose students will base their selection on academic merit rather than diversity of student mix.

All of this is not an argument against the funding of private schools. What the Coalition has done is more than just a matter of figures, more than an argument about who gets what and when. It is about the redefinition of public education itself. This is hidden in the current policy, and it deserves to be debated urgently. After all, to ask questions about the sort of public education system we want in the 21st century is to raise fundamental questions about the nature of Australian democracy. These are questions the government and the Minister have studiously avoided.

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